

Psychiatric Patient Advocate Office

Bureau du défenseur des droits des malades mentaux

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July 12, 1989

Mr. Howard Danson
Acting Director
Psychiatric Hospitals Branch
Ministry of Health
15 Overlea Boulevard
Toronto, Ontario M4H 1A9

Dear Mr. Danson,

Re: Mr. Chris Brown: Environmental Factors Affecting
Mental Health

Our program has been contacted by Mr. Chris Brown on several occasions regarding this issue. I understand that he has also corresponded with Mr. Jay Kaufman, and you may be preparing a response on his behalf. Our review has found that there is a growing body of knowledge indicating that some people are sensitive to agents in their environment including building materials used in residences and public buildings, cleaning products and other items such as food additives and perfumes. In some cases, the physical effects are so profound that the person's career and family relationships are in jeopardy. Mr. Brown asserts that environmental agents can also have serious central nervous system effects; that some sufferers have suicided in despair of their predicament; that these symptoms can easily be misdiagnosed as mental illness and may be treated inappropriately with neuroleptic medication.

At Mr. Brown's suggestion I have ordered and received from Health and Welfare Canada a 244 page bibliography entitled "Healthy Environments for Canadians", which I would be happy to share with you. The mainstream medical profession has often responded sceptically to claims about the effects of environment on health. Some of the claims may seem extravagant or unsubstantiated. However, it is interesting to note the number of school boards in Ontario which have recognized the extent to which a child's environmental sensitivities can affect behaviour and ability to learn.

As an alternative to the traditional responses - putting the child on high doses of medication, applying stigmatizing labels and streaming the child through special classes for those with behavioural problems and learning disabilities, these Boards have constructed "clean rooms" in some schools. These rooms are free of the agents - carpet glues, formaldehyde from particle board, mold in the ventilation system, etc. that affect some students, and the results are apparently quite positive.

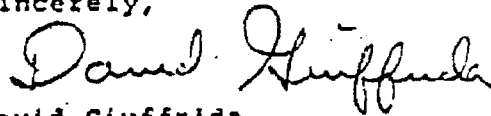
Just as a child's mental and physical health and academic future can be jeopardized by failure to deal with environmental sensitivities, one can imagine equally devastating results if a person displaying a CNS response to toxins were mis-diagnosed in a psychiatric facility. Indeed, the toxins might be present in the facility, jeopardizing hope of relief.

The problem of hospital environment is not new to the Ministry. For example, there have been complaints for years that Queen Street Mental Health Centre is a "sick building". Staff there (including our own) complain of headaches and fatigue resulting from the quality of the air. The effects on patients exposed to that environment twenty-four hours a day must be more dramatic.

However, despite the potential size of the problem, we feel the Ministry should work towards raising clinicians' awareness of the effects of environmental toxins, and should have alternatives available to patients suspected of having these sensitivities. Just as diagnosis of mental illness requires the physician to investigate and rule out physical causes, head trauma or substance abuse, they should also consider CNS response to environmental toxins as a possible cause of the presenting symptoms. Treatment should include placing the patient in a clean room while in hospital, and discharge planning to a clean home environment.

I realize that this is an area which is going to require continuing research and creative solutions. I am circulating this letter to all Patient Advocates and requesting they inform our office of any cases in which environmental sensitivities have been an issue for patients. Our office would be pleased to assist in the development of responses to this concern.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Giuffrida".

David Giuffrida
Legal Counsel

DG/dg

c.c. Mr. Chris Brown
All Patient Advocates